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## Refracted Communication

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## Refracted Communication\*

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### Introduction

Intercultural communication (ICC) brings interlocutors from different cultures into interpersonal communication. Misunderstandings that consequently emerge are not easily solvable because ways of solving misunderstandings are different according to cultures. In some cultures, people may resort to further communication; but in others they may wait until they forget about misunderstandings. However, the fact that two converse in one language tends to delude them into believing that they can communicate without misunderstandings (Remember the cliché, "We speak the same language"). Thus, when misunderstandings come, they often come as surprises. Then the two tend to adhere to their respective culture's way of solving misunderstandings. This makes ICC doubly difficult. A must for successful ICC, is therefore, to expect misunderstandings, and to know why they occur.

Research in the area of ICC between Americans and the Japanese have helped to eliminate the delusion described above. To name a few: Barnlund showed differences in self-disclosure (1975). Americans self-disclose more, whereas, the Japanese less. An implication of the findings is that self-disclosure in America is a vital requirement for satisfying communication, whereas in Japan, it is not. Attaching the same value to self-disclosure in ICC is not fruitful.

Condon explained the importance of intermediaries in Japanese intracultural communication, contrasting with less frequent use of them in American counterpart (1980). In America, use of intermediaries can be regarded

as a sign of one's weakness (p. 128). However, in Japan the use of them is to help communication flow smoothly. The presence of a third person can help two think beyond the scope of "you and I." Again, attaching the same value to one thing is not productive. One also learns here a need for further examination of Japanese triadic communication. Do they act differently in triad? What do they do there? Why do they do it? The answer to the first question is "yes"; the one to the second is "refracted communication"; and the one to the last is to "maintain face" (the terms, refracted communication and face, will be defined later).

### Method

The purpose of this paper is to examine the following four different communication acts in Japanese triadic communication in terms of face and refracted communication: praising, making suggestions, explaining, and apologizing. Conversation samples for the first, the second, and the fourth acts are fabricated by the author of the paper. The one for the third was adopted from a T.V. program. In order to accomplish the goal, the concept of face, face threatening act (FTA), and refracted communication will be introduced.

### *Face*

One refers to face in certain ways: loss of face, maintaining or preserving face, defending face, or even threatening the face of others. However, what is face? The phenomenon of face has been a vital concern of scholars in sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and communication. Two linguists, Brown and Levinson, simply define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself..." (1987; p. 61). Face then, is a value system which is not universal but culturally dependent, just as "self esteem" differs from one person to another (p. 2). Face, therefore, can be lost when one is humiliated, or when strong face threatening acts occur. Nevertheless, it can

also be maintained or preserved by one's communication effort.

### *Face Threatening Act (FTA)*

A conversation analyst, McLaughlin, defines FTA as follows (1984):  
A speech act that threatens the positive face of the speaker or hearer, that is, their desire to be regarded as worthy of approval; or the negative face of either party, that is their desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition (p. 272).

Then, an innocuous utterance may become an FTA. For example, "What do you do?" can be just that if it is uttered to a person who has just lost a job.

### *Refracted Communication*

A Japanese anthropologist, Takie S. Lebra, introduces refracted communication as one of the ways of defending face by the Japanese. She defines it as follows (1976):

A slightly different version of triadization is one in which Ego communicates with Alter by talking to a third person in Alter's presence. What Ego cannot directly express to Alter is expressed to the third person with the expectation that Alter will understand Ego's real intention (p. 122).

Why is it called refracted communication? Because the message from the speaker is refracted to an intended listener by way of a pseudo-listener. It does not mean any distortion of the meaning. How and why it is done will be examined in detail.

## Discussion

### *Praising*

In Japan, if one praises others directly, i.e., "without tactics", he/she often receives the ritualistic response of negation. Technically speaking, the one

who praises in this manner may lose the positive face of being a good praise giver. Therefore, this act can become an FTA for him/her. At the same time, it can also become the same for a praise receiver, for he/she must negate a praise to maintain the positive face of being modest. This praise giving and negating can last forever if it is done without tactics (One can imagine such an occurrence in an American - Japanese dyad because of Americans' tendency to be direct and Japanese' tendency to be modest). If there is one more person present, loss of face is felt more seriously on both sides because of the involvement of an extra witness.

To avoid the complication above, what do the Japanese do? They employ someone as a pseudo - receiver of praise and use him/her as a board to refract the message to an intended receiver. This tactic might seem beyond ordinary communicative capacity. However, it is in fact ubiquitous in Japanese triadic communication. For example, one can praise a child to praise the parents. One rarely says to the parents that they have brought up their child so beautifully, but he/she does say: "Oh, wonderful! You are such a little gentleman, aren't you, Ichiro?" The reason for its effectiveness is that the praise is directed to little Ichiro, not to the parents. The latter's appropriate response will be a smile or the nearly inaudible, "Oh, no." (If the parents respond any more than that, they are breaking the rule of "speak only when you are spoken to," which they themselves have taught Ichiro). Needless to say, the compliment also praised Ichiro's parents. The implication of the utterance is that they have raised Ichiro very well. Ichiro, of course, does not have to hear his parents saying, "No, no. He is still a spoiled trouble maker." Here the positive faces of the speaker and the intended listeners were kept intact.

### *Making Suggestions*

Making suggestions is a possible FTA. Imagine a committee which has just included a new comer (The number of the committee members can be

three or more). If he/she makes a suggestion without any tactics, it can cause loss of the positive face on the part of the rest. Not coming up with a new idea may be embarrassing to them. Also the new comer may lose the positive face of being culturally mature because of his lack of consideration for feelings of the rest. Both losses can be prevented by refracted communication. At a meeting, the new comer may talk to one of the members as a refracting board. Because the talk here was not done after the chair person's acknowledgement, it is still unofficial. However, upon "overhearing it", the intended listener (the chair person), can take up a suggestion officially. By officializing it, the chair person has enacted the role of judging a fleeting thought. The public, the rest of the committee, has witnessed the enactment. Thus, "the public image" of the chair person is kept intact, which in turn prevented loss of the positive face of the other member(s). In total, the positive faces of the new comer, the chair person, and the rest of the committee were protected efficiently.

### *Explaining*

As is true in making suggestions, explaining is an act which entails a possibility of causing loss of face for an explainee. It makes it clear that he/she, because of lack of experience or knowledge, did not know a fact which an explainer knew very well. It is most dangerous when the former is higher in a social hierarchy than the latter. Therefore, in such a situation the company of the third person becomes helpful. Here is such an encounter from a television episode of Takeda Shingen, which shows an excellent use of refracted communication (The approximate translation by the writer of this paper suffices the purpose):

- Kagetora Uesugi (War lord): "What kind of a man is Shingen?"  
Yoshikiyo Murakami (Warrior): "Just awful; he's the sort who acts according to his animal desires."

Norimasa Uesugi (Warrior): "You have lost against Shingen.  
Losers usually speak ill of and regard  
a winner unreasonably."

Norimasa appears to have reproached Yoshikiyo, who conveyed inaccurate information about Shingen to Kagetora; however, he has in fact used the former as a refracting board to explain to the lord, a general human tendency without causing him loss of face. Norimasa's positive face of being a good explainer was thus protected along with Kagetora's positive face of knowledgeable lord.

### *Apologizing*

Honesty is the best policy; and, sincere apology is, too. However, we tend not to make sincere apologies as we grow up. Bare apology not only puts an apologizer but the receiver ill at ease because the latter must match the former verbally and nonverbally in forgiving. If the former apologizes using "very much," the latter must forgive by saying, "quite all right." The latter has difficulty treating the matter lightly. In other words, the former disabled the latter to treat the matter lightly. However, if an ambiguous apology is made, the story becomes different. It prevents loss of face for the apologizer, which unburdens the receiver as a result. One can make such an apology by bringing in the unconscious part of one's self:

Apologizer: "I seem to forget things lately. I don't know what is wrong with me. A few minutes ago I promised to do one thing, and next minute I forgot it completely..."

Receiver: "Don't worry. That happens to everybody. It means that you are occupied in doing your job and you are really busy. That's all there is to it."

Here the apologizer is triadizing the dyad by bringing in his unconscious self, which everybody recognizes as his/her possession, the forgetful-self in this instance. This part of the self is held responsible for a certain mistake, which

is used as a refracting board. A forgiver, on the other hand, expresses sympathy to this self since he has it too. An apology for a certain mistake is now made and forgiven ambiguously but effectively, without causing loss of face on either side. The question of whether an apologizer and a forgiver are sincere is not the issue; the point is that the act mentioned above does occur in Japanese interpersonal communication.

### Conclusion

An American may often be puzzled why his/her Japanese friend communicates differently when there is one more person present. The puzzlement arises due to the belief that one should act the same, whether in dyad or triad, which may be true in America, but not in Japan. In dyadic communication, one may fail to see importance of face; however, as it was shown in this paper, face plays an important role in Japanese triadic communication, and loss of face is prevented by refracted communication.

In praising and explaining, the positive face of the speaker and the intended listener was protected. In making suggestions, the positive face of the speaker, the intended listener, and others who were present was protected. In apologizing, triadizing of dyad was done by bringing in another side of the speaker, which enabled the protection of the positive face of the speaker and the intended listener. This triadization merely emphasizes the importance of face and refracted communication in Japanese interpersonal communication.

For refracted communication to function properly, the target person must understand that a message is directed to him/her but not to the pseudo-listener. This awareness is sustained by understanding of face and refracted communication, which entails a possibility that refracted communication is inseparable from face. This in itself can be an guide line for successful communication. When a message is refracted, one is well advised not to cause



loss of face.

The analyses have examined refracted communication solely in terms of saving face. To have fuller understanding of it, it needs to be examined from other perspectives. For example, qualities of an ideal pseudo-listener must be studied. What kind of a person must he/she be if he/she is involved in triadic communication? This question is a vital concern for Americans who want to become successful communicators in Japanese style of triadic communication, for they may have to play the role of pseudo-listeners.

In conclusion, it must be stressed that not all Japanese are free from causing loss of face. Children and young adults, for example, may not have developed the sense of what "the public image" is. Thus, Americans who are yet new to Japanese culture may not only be able to learn from them, but learn with them.

#### Notes

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## 鼎談における屈折の機能

兼 本 円

文化人類学者 Lebra (1976) の屈折のコミュニケーション (Refracted Communication) と Brown & Levinson (1987) の Face の概念を用いて日本人の鼎談の一現象を考察した。この特殊な伝達手段では話者は仮の聞き手 (pseudo-listener/refracting board) と真の聞き手 (intended listener) の二者を設定し、前者に話しかけることによって後者に真の意図をくみとってもらうことを期待している。よって、異文化の者はこの現象とその機能の理解なしには日本人との鼎談を成功させることは不可能であろう。

本論は、賞賛 (praising)、提案 (making suggestions)、説明 (explaining)、と謝罪 (apologizing) の鼎談に焦点を絞って、以下のことを明らかにした。賞賛に於いては話者と真の聞き手の Face、提案では話者と真の聞き手と仮の聞き手の三者の Face、説明では話者と真の聞き手の Face が屈折のコミュニケーションを用いて保たれている。謝罪においては、話者が自己の一局面を話題にして会話の参加者を一人増やしたかのような状態を作り屈折のコミュニケーションを可能にして話者と真の聞き手の Face を維持している。

今後の課題として、考察の視点を変えることによって生ずる、理想的な聞き手としての資質と屈折のコミュニケーションの持つ他の機能の考察が挙げられる。